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ABSTRACT

The campus unrest in recent years past has facilitated a change of major importance within the higher education community. Educators have been forced to reevaluate college curricula in order to make it more relevant to students. This paper describes programs at 30 colleges and universities in which students are allowed to design their own programs of study. The range of programs described is wide, and reflects the degree of innovation that characterizes the move toward student-initiated academic planning.  
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# RESEARCH *Currents*

## Student-Designed Curricula by Paul R. Givens

One of the valuable effects of recent generational revolts on college and university campuses has been a renewed concern about the development of curricular options. Institutions have generally regarded curricular revisions as a continual process, but today there seems to be an almost universal effort both to increase the number of curricular options and to make them more meaningful. This has led to the development of student-initiated and to a great extent student-designed plans of academic study. Some programs offering this option possibly reflect a change-for-change's-sake attitude but in many instances this trend reflects a sincere regard for helping students develop a life-long momentum in self-education.

This paper deals with programs giving the student an opportunity to participate directly in planning his undergraduate learning experiences. The author requested information regarding such programs from 115 colleges and universities throughout the country. These institutions were selected through a study of publications such as the *Inter-Collegiate Bulletins* and through personal knowledge of programs in existence. Also, the institutions initially contacted were asked to indicate other institutions wherein such plans are functioning. Of 90 responses received, 30 institutions (see Summary of Programs) had programs which in some measure permit the student to design his own undergraduate program of study. Thus, the sample of schools is in no way random nor necessarily representative and the author is aware that several fine programs have been omitted. But the range of programs described is wide, and reflects the degree of innovation which characterizes the move toward student-initiated academic planning.

### Self-Designed Programs

It is interesting to note that this is a modern movement; with the exception of the Princeton program which was introduced in 1961, nearly all of the programs have been initiated within the last couple of years.

There is considerable variation in the degree of freedom given to the student to design his studies; but, understandably,

all of the institutions assume that the student will consult with a faculty member in planning his educational objectives and activities. The general studies degree program at Ithaca College permits the student to take any combination of courses he chooses, and some 230 of approximately 4,000 students are enrolled in this program. This freedom is also given to students enrolled in the Bachelor of Special Studies degree program at Cornell College in Iowa where the student is required to file a plan of study with his adviser each term. Graceland College offers an experimental curriculum which is free of requirements, and which includes the selection of topics to be studied in three-week modules. Many other institutions provide a certain degree of freedom in the design of study plans, but most of them retain certain course or distribution requirements for graduation. Chatham College requires for graduation the completion of two January term projects and a tutorial, but students are allowed to center their work on a problem involving several disciplines. The Chatham student may elect to create a mosaic of course work appropriate to her personal intellectual requirements.

The programs range from rather small informal programs involving four students to programs available to the entire student body. At the University of Connecticut a separate "Inner College Experiment" was established as a 3-year venture in self-determined academic planning. Sixty students and five staff members make up this organization, which finds that its proposed concept of education differs from that of the University at large. The director of Inner College observes these differences:

The attempt to incorporate the Inner College experiment within the existing academic framework of the University posed serious problems, for the proposals of the former and the existing practices of the latter derive from different theories of education. Where one theory views education in terms of motivation and growth in autonomy through personal involvement and responsibility, the other sees education in terms of mastery of a subject through expert instruction. Where one theory stresses the goal of self-fulfillment through exploration, the other emphasizes the goal of fulfilling standards of excellence; where one plays up the excitement of discovery on one's own, the other values the efficiency of informed teaching; where one encourages the student for new roles in society, the other prepares him for established careers. Although these differences are differences of emphasis rather than of logical incompatibility, at a practical level they lead to important points of opposition on the question of who has what kind of say regarding a student's education. [1]

### Learning Contracts

An increasing number of institutions offer the student the opportunity to enter into a contractual agreement—sometimes formally written—to complete certain academic activities.

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Sometimes the contract includes the enrollment in a course, but it might also include extra-course activities. Among the institutions making use of the contract plan are: Evergreen State College (Washington), Harvard College, New College of the University of Alabama, New College (Florida), Ottawa College (Kansas), Simpson College (Iowa), and Whittier College (California).

At Harvard the student enrolled in its "Special Studies Program" is expected to complete certain requirements (a half-course in expository writing, one course in each of the three divisions, and two full courses outside his area of concentration), but he is also free to develop an individual study plan which includes a statement of his academic goals and the learning activities in which he is to participate. At New College in Florida a student signs a contract at the beginning of each term; the contract may involve a combination of in-course or extra-course activities. The "Educational Contract" at New College is described to the student as follows:

Each term you are at New College, you will join with a faculty member (called a sponsor) to design a program of activities for that term. The program that the two of you agree upon, together with a mutually conceived statement establishing the criteria for evaluating the term's work, is called a "contract." You and your sponsor are entirely responsible for determining both your program and the evaluation criteria and procedures. At the end of the term your academic standing at New College will be determined by your success at fulfilling the terms of your contract. [2]

The New College at the University of Alabama functions on a student contract basis. The contracts are drawn up and approved by a contract-advising committee consisting of a faculty member, the student, and, at the student's option, a maximum of two other persons of the student's choice. The two committee members chosen by the student may be members of the faculty, fellow students, or persons from outside the campus community.

A study plan of this nature is in effect at Simpson College. In order to insure both depth and breadth, the Simpson student is required to limit his enrollment to 12 units in his major department and 24 units in the division of his major.

Newly established Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, offers two kinds of programs as ways of earning academic credit: "coordinated studies" and "contracted studies." Coordinated studies involves the study of central problems or themes in a small group setting while contracted studies offers opportunities for both individual and small-group contracts. The student at Evergreen is informed as follows:

For a substantial part of your career at Evergreen, you may work in contracted studies. Using this pattern, you as an individual or as a member of a small group sharing your interests can sign up with a faculty member or other staff member to earn credit by doing a specific project, carrying out a specific investigation, mastering a specific skill, or dealing with a specific body of subject matter. . . . We call this arrangement a "contract" for learning, to emphasize that it is an agreement to do a piece of work and that it implies direct, mutual responsibility between you and the experienced person whom you have asked to help you. [3]

At Johnston College, a college within the University of Redlands, the contract is described as "a clearly defined agreement between responsible individuals and individualized intentions subject to change and re-negotiation." Faculty and students at Johnston have drawn up guidelines in the formulation of contracts. These include:

1. Cross-cultural experience.
2. Methodologies: Does the plan include opportunities for the practice of several important methodologies?
3. Integration of Learning: Does the plan facilitate integration of the student's intellectual and affective (attitudinal) learning experiences?
4. Concentration: Does the plan have a feasible focal point or

"major" emphasis?

5. Contemporary problems: Does the plan indicate alertness to the continually changing urgent problems of modern times?
6. Independence: Is there evidence that the student is developing ability to continue learning effectively after graduation?
7. Other: Does the plan satisfy the following:
  - a) Language—If foreign language is not included, is there reason for its omission and is there a reasonable substitute?
  - b) Physical Education—Does the plan include assurance of competence in at least two sports that will have sustained value to the individual?
  - c) State Requirements—Does the plan meet state requirements for special courses and for careers?
  - d) Professional Objectives—Does the plan take into account the student's professional or graduate school objectives? [4]

A review of contract programs suggests that there is probably a range of formalized supervision, although the degree of supervision is difficult to infer from written descriptions of the programs. In most institutions the evaluation of contracts is made by supervisory and evaluating committees. Rightfully, the institutions seem to be as concerned with supervising the drafting of contracts as with evaluating the outcomes of the commitments.

### *Programs for the Superior Student*

Most of the 30 programs reviewed stipulate no specific grade point average as an eligibility requirement for entrance to the program. However, some institutions restrict the privilege of self-designed study to those who have demonstrated superior academic promise or achievement. The four institutions of this study offering programs primarily for the superior student are: Lawrence University, University of Oregon, Princeton University, and Western Michigan University.

Lawrence University specifies no minimum grade point required for admission to its "Scholar of the University" program, but it is clearly stated that the opportunity will appeal most strongly to students of special preparation and ability. The program permits the student to work out a plan of study with two faculty members. The plan is to be consistent with the curricular aims of the University and the studies should be equivalent to one or more regular majors.

At the University of Oregon a student may be nominated by a faculty member for acceptance to the independent study program of the University's Honors College. The criteria for acceptance to the program are, "evidence of creative or scholarly originality and ability to work independently toward a creative or scholarly goal." When accepted to the program, the individual is exempt from all academic requirements of courses, credits, and grades. While it is expected that the student will develop a broad liberal program, he works with three faculty members in planning studies directed at some creative or scholarly goal. An interesting feature of the program is that the student, with the advice of his committee chairman, prepares a written statement of the criteria to be used in evaluating his progress toward his academic goals.

The purpose of the Princeton "University Scholar" program is to "provide a small group of especially qualified students with the maximum freedom in planning a program of studies that will fulfill their individual needs and interests." These select students are exempt from the normal language and distribution requirements, but they must complete a concentration within a department.

The flexibility of the program is illustrated in the following two examples presented in a descriptive brochure of the program:

1. One university scholar, a senior in the Woodrow Wilson School, is using the freedom of the program to do two theses, one on the recent history of Israel, the other on the philoso-



pher Spinoza. He is taking very few courses but working closely with experts in each of the two fields.

2. The only freshman in the program at this writing is a young pianist who won the WQXR piano award last year and who appeared as a soloist in Carnegie Hall and Philharmonic Hall. He has been exempt from the University's normal natural science requirements so that he can devote time to practicing which otherwise would be consumed in laboratory sessions. [5]

The Honors College at Western Michigan University offers a unique program for freshmen and sophomores. The program is called the 10-20 project—referring to the fact that enrollment is restricted to 10 sophomores and 20 freshmen. These students are freed of major and minor requirements. Students are invited to join the project and the letter of invitation notes:

We believe that the University should be a vehicle of opportunity rather than a buttress of obligation. By removing certain traditional requirements of the University's academic structure we hope to aid the creative and enterprising student in imaginatively designing a program related to his or her objectives and interests. [6]

The above honors programs offer the student wide choices in academic experiences. A fundamental assumption of these programs seems to be that the superior student is more capable of profiting from learning opportunities under conditions of self-guidance than is the ordinary student.

### Forms of Evaluation

It is probably true that institutions of higher education would be less hesitant to develop self-designed programs if the problems of evaluation were easily solved. Highly flexible and relatively unstructured programs often do not lend themselves to traditional assessment. Recognizing this problem, many program directors have developed non-traditional methods of appraising and reporting student performance. Institutions following the contract system of program planning usually require an evaluation by a committee, and assessment is by means of written appraisals. At Johnston College (University of Redlands) instructors give a written critique of the student's performance. The student's transcript normally includes course descriptions and instructor's critiques. The critiques are converted to letter grades if this is necessary to satisfy an outside source as, e.g., in transfer. At Whittier College the instructor has the option of substituting statements of evaluation for grades. A rather elaborate cumulative portfolio is to be kept on each student at Evergreen State College—an institution which is in its first year of operation. Descriptions of its coordinated and contracted studies programs are included in the portfolio along with instructors' evaluations and a statement of self-appraisal by the student. Whenever possible the portfolio is to include work samples such as photographs or tape recordings. Graceland College divides its academic year into a series of three-week modules and a module is successfully completed when participants in the experimental program agree that it is completed. No letter grades are issued.

The majority of the programs reviewed have modified the traditional "A-F" grading system to allow for grading options. Cornell College in Iowa permits the satisfactory-unsatisfactory option for all courses and letters of evaluation are used in appraising independent study.

Several of the institutions studied have eliminated the failing grade. The rationale for this is that failure is thought to be of little worth as a stimulus for academic progress. Academic experiences should, in the opinion of the no-fail advocates, be very positive experiences which should be motivating influences for continued life-long pursuit of educational goals.

Some institutions non-passing grades are retained for purposes of internal counseling, but some feel that the recording

of these evaluations on a transcript will serve no worthwhile purpose.

It seems to be agreed that greater flexibility in grading becomes necessary as the student is given more freedom to individualize his academic program.

### Comments on Academic Reform

A review of programs which give the student increased participation in the design of his academic experience provokes one to raise certain questions regarding learning processes and the nature of human maturation and motivation. Are all students really able to accept this responsibility? Should such programs be limited to the intellectually gifted or are personality factors more important? Do such programs encourage teachers to assume a passive role in the teacher-learner relationship; if so, is this desired? Is the enjoyment of learning a requisite to significant learning? Are teachers prepared to accept less formal student-teacher relationships? These and many other questions may be asked as the trend toward self-designed programs continues.

The fundamental assumptions of such programs are stated quite clearly by some institutions. The new curriculum at Brown University assumes:

1. That the student is ultimately responsible for his own education and therefore should be an active participant in its creation and definition.
2. The relationship between faculty and student is a vital part of the entire educational process. [7]

At Whittier College the far-reaching goals of the program are as follows:

For students, the curriculum reform at Whittier College is designed to strengthen personal identity, sharpen intellectual effectiveness, deepen perception of the diversity in human experience and knowledge, avoid the encapsulation of a single academic perspective, and provide those competencies, skills, and strategies that bring about meaningful inter-personal relationships yet self-directing, fully functioning individuals. Lastly, for our faculty new approaches to the teaching-learning process, increased professional responsibility, and continued learning in what is, after all, a life-long endeavor are all in order. [8]

Statements such as those made by Brown and Whittier give a frame of reference from which the accent on self-initiated learning can be viewed.

### Summary of Programs

A summary of the 30 programs providing for student-designed plans of study follows:

**University of Alabama**, titled New College, initiated fall of 1970, requires 4 years of successful study under supervision of a committee. Special features include: learning contract and individualized graduation requirements.

**Bucknell University**, titled College Major, initiated spring of 1972, requires completion of unspecified courses in humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics. Special features include: freedom to develop plan of study; senior project.

**Brown University**, titled Independent Concentration, initiated fall of 1969, requires successful completion of independent concentration program. Special feature: student lists courses he plans to complete and objectives of his study.

**Chatham College**, titled The New Curriculum, initiated fall of 1971, requires two interim programs and a tutorial. Special features include: 10 days of class attendance without registration for freshmen; designing of own interdisciplinary program.

**Coe College**, titled Educational Plan, initiated fall of 1970, requires 2 courses in introduction to liberal arts and a 7-11 course concentration of interdepartmental sequence devised by student.

**Colorado College**, titled Adviser Plan, initiated fall of 1967,

requires that all departmental requirements in major field be met and that course schedule be approved by adviser. The student does design his own course.

**University of Connecticut**, titled Inner College Experiment, initiated fall of 1970, requires successful completion of courses and projects. Special features include: students initiate and in some instances teach courses, design own courses, and may major in a discipline by completing major requirements.

**Cornell College**, titled Bachelor of Special Studies, initiated fall of 1971, requires successful completion of course study. Special features include: progress report is submitted by student to adviser; one baccalaureate credit is given for each report approved.

**Davis & Elkins College**, titled Contract Program, initiated fall of 1972, requires unified area of concentration, with the complete program subject to approval by sponsoring faculty members.

**Dickinson College**, titled Interdepartmental Concentration, initiated fall of 1971, requires completion of a major of 3 courses each in humanities, social sciences and science (including one 2-semester lab sequence); languages to intermediate level; 2 years of physical education; and one nonwestern course.

**Evergreen State College**, titled Contracted Studies, initiated fall of 1971, requires successful completion of coordinated (theme-centered) and contracted studies.

**Graceland College**, titled Experimental Curriculum, initiated fall of 1970, requires final evaluation by Council.

**Grinnell College**, titled Revised Academic Plan, initiated fall of 1970, requires completion of a major with not more than 92 credits in any division nor more than 48 in any department. Special feature: student may elect conventional, interdisciplinary or independent major.

**Hamilton College** (program open to all students), initiated fall of 1969, requires 4 winter study projects in area of concentration. Much freedom of choice is provided.

**Harvard University** (Arts and Sciences College), titled Special Studies, initiated fall of 1971, requires half course in expository writing, one course in each of three divisions, and two full courses outside area of concentration. The student prepares individual plan of study.

**Holy Cross College**, titled Experimental Studies, initiated fall of 1970, requires a 14-semester-hour major and successful completion of experimental studies. Student may either design his own field work-study project or a total program leading to a degree.

**Ithaca College**, titled General Studies Major, initiated fall of 1969, requires successful completion of course study. Special feature: student has complete freedom to select courses, with no concentration necessary.

**University of Iowa**, titled Bachelor of General Studies, initiated fall of 1970, requires 60 hours at junior and senior levels, limit of 40 credits in any one department, and one semester of rhetoric. Students design own plan of study.

**Lawrence University**, titled Scholar of the University, initiated fall of 1970, requires the equivalent of one or more majors. Special features: student may include in his design regular courses, off-campus programs, or independent study and is exempt from usual requirements, exams, etc. if instructor consents.

**University of Minnesota**, titled Bachelor of Elected Studies, initiated winter of 1972, requires 75 credits in upper division, limit of 30 quarter hours in noncollege liberal arts courses. Special feature: freedom to select courses consistent with student's interests.

**New College** (Fla.), titled New Educational Contract, initiated fall of 1971, requires senior projects and baccalaureate examination, four independent study projects, and successful fulfillment of contracts which are signed at beginning of each term. Students and faculty design the contracts.

**University of Oregon**, titled Independent Study-Honors College, initiated fall of 1970, requires four years of successful study under supervision of committee. Special features: honors students are exempt from all academic requirements, credits and grades, and plan their own study programs. Student and committee chairman state criteria used for evaluation.

**Ottawa University** (Kan.), titled The New Plan of Education for Ottawa, initiated fall of 1970, requires 9 credits in general education, 6 to 10 courses in department study, minimum of 7 weeks of off-campus experience, and 7 terms of physical education. Student prepares a contracted plan of study.

**Princeton University**, titled University Scholar Program, initiated fall of 1961, requires fulfillment of a departmental major's requirements. Main feature: much freedom in kinds, levels, and number of courses from which the student may choose.

**University of Redlands** (Johnston College), titled Academic Program, initiated fall of 1969, requires successful completion of graduation contract (approved by committee by end of sophomore year). Specific guidelines are stated for the formulation of contracts.

**Simpson College**, The Academic Plan, initiated fall of 1970, requires limit of 12 units of credit in major department and 24 units in division of major. Student establishes a study plan for one to four years.

**Wesleyan University**, titled General Education, requires field of concentration and comprehensive examination. Students design own interdisciplinary major with approval of faculty.

**Western Michigan University** (Honors College), titled 10-20 Program, initiated fall of 1970, requires acceptable paper or other production at end of sophomore, junior, and senior years; oral examination in senior year; and a senior honor paper. Students design own study plan; program is restricted to 10 sophomores and 20 freshmen.

**Whittier College**, titled New Curriculum at Whittier, initiated fall of 1971, requires 3 January sessions, 4 extended half modules, State of California requirements, minimum of 15 modules in field of concentration, physical education and English. Graduation study contract is drawn up by student by end of his freshman year.

**Western Washington State** (Fairhaven College), titled Interdisciplinary Concentration, initiated fall of 1970, requires 20 quarter hours in the humanities, 12 each in natural science and social science, and 3 in composition. Student and tutor design a set of learning experiences totalling 50 credits.

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